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SUBJECT: U.S. JOURNALIST: TEHRAN MAN IN THE STREET LOVES  
AMERICA BUT ALSO LIKES AHMADINEJAD'S DEFIANCE

Classified By: Political Minister Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. Summary: (C) An American journalist just back from her third working visit to Iran reports a paradox in popular feeling in Tehran: the man in the street has a positive view of America and hates the current high level of political oppression, but at the same time takes great patriotic pride in Ahmadinejad's apparently successful defiance of the West. The journalist believes this feeling of patriotic pride in Ahmadinejad's boldness, if not his economic record, is shared by those (numerous) Iranians who disagree with Ahmadinejad's anti-western, anti-democratic views, as well as those (poorly educated) Iranians who embrace his hard-line rhetoric; their president's successful defiance strikes a common emotional chord. She found, nevertheless, a pervasive sense of skepticism among Iranians about regime motives, and reports that her expert contacts in Iran see, behind the regime's condemnations of direct talks with the West, a deep-seated desire to engage. End summary.

12. (C) Fox News journalist and AmCit Amy Kellogg (please protect), an established Embassy contact, just back from a two-week working visit to Iran, her third visit to Iran in the last year, recently shared her impressions with poloff. (Embassy comment: Kellogg has posted several stories on the Fox News website, generally critical of human rights and political repression in Iran, based on this latest, as well as previous, visits to Iran. End comment).

Ahmadinejad Paradox: Critics See Him as Iran's Champion

13. (C) Kellogg said that even Iranians who criticize clerical control and the hard-liners' rhetoric at the same time express admiration for, and take obvious personal pleasure in, Ahmadinejad's boldness and his apparent success as a defender of Iran against international isolation and powerful foreign governments. She said Ahmadinejad is generally seen as personally ascetic, and therefore non-corrupt, even though the same Iranians also complain of pervasive corruption in the government that Ahmedinejad leads. This admiring view of Ahmedinejad as an ascetic, defiant patriot is, according to Kellogg, held by many of the same men in the street who stress their good will for and sentimental attachments to America. At the same time, according to Kellogg, Iranians' admiration for Ahmadinejad's international assertiveness does not negate their deep dissatisfaction with Iran's economy.

## Times are Tough but Sanctions Will Not Affect the Regime

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¶4. (C) Most non-official Iranians Kellogg met appear to be experiencing economic hardship - the need to hold a second or third job is universal for middle class "Tehranis," while severe unemployment, capital flight, and the signs of widespread drug addiction, as well as a general daily struggle for existence, were evident in more blighted areas of south Tehran that Kellogg visited. She said people of all classes have a distinct awareness of the sanctions threat hanging over Iran. The man in the street tends to believe multilateral sanctions will be imposed, but do not think sanctions will affect the regime or its security apparatus, which is seen as enjoying an insulated, affluent lifestyle.

## Soccer Fans: "Nuclear Power -- Up Yours"

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¶5. (C) Despite these positive views of Ahmedinejad, Kellogg also found a pervasive distrust of the regime, and cynicism about its motives, extending to Iran's nuclear program as well. The most vivid example came during an interview at Tehran University, in which Kellogg's interlocutor, a university teacher, showed her streaming live video of a rowdy crowd at a soccer game. The teacher explained that one team and many hundreds of its supporters, rather than echoing the conventional halftime chants from the opposing team and its fans of "Death to America" and "Nuclear Energy Is Our Right," was replying with chants of "Death to You" and "Nuclear Power up Your (Backside)."

## Less fear of U.S. attack

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¶6. (C) Kellogg also said the sense of dread about a U.S. military attack, which had been a common expectation during her visit in late spring of 2006, was now gone, much to everyone's relief. That dread had been replaced by a general sense of being "beaten down" by the economy and by the ceaseless drumbeat of Islamic rhetoric, not only on foreign policy, but, more immediately, against symbols and small daily pleasures like western music or clothing.

## Regime on Talks with West - an opening ploy, not a rejection

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¶7. (C) Kellogg also reported that the policy experts she interviewed believe that Ahmadinejad's recent rhetoric condemning direct talks, though harsh to a western ear, in fact indicates regime interest in engaging, not lack of interest. She reports her expert sources in Tehran (Embassy note: she named only one, Tehran political economist Saeed Laylez (protect). End note) argue the hysterical tone and substance of the regime's rhetoric actually indicates regime interest in, and insecurities about, direct talks, as distinct from outright hostility.

¶8. (C) Laylez reportedly argued regime rhetoric reflects classic Iranian negotiating tactics, used most notably by Mossadegh during oil nationalization talks in 1952-53, in which Mossadegh relied not on linear, nominally logical analysis aimed at eliminating ambiguity, but rather on emotionally charged posturing, and circular arguments, aimed at energizing a domestic Iranian audience. (Embassy Comment: Some of Embassy London's Iranian expat contacts, while arguing that the regime does want talks, nevertheless posit an additional tactic in the regime's statements, involving a near-continual "moving of the goalposts," or re-setting of conditions, that would make direct talks difficult to convene on an agreed, unambiguous footing. End comment).

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